

# From the Gospel: Transfigured or transhumanised?

We improve the human condition and the physical universe only by safeguarding the principles of communion and stewardship

Community

Religion

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🕒 3 min read

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Transfiguration (detail), by Raphael. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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Second Sunday in Lent. Today's readings: [Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18](#); [Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19](#); [Romans 8:31b-34](#); [Mark 9:2-10](#)

Fusing philosophy, religion, and ethics, the Russian Orthodox futurist philosopher [Nikolai Fyodorov](#) (1829-1903) initiated a movement that came to be known as “Cosmism”. He thought that in order for humankind to reach its full potential and legitimately claim sovereignty over the cosmos, it would be necessary to use science and technology both to improve life on earth and to pursue physical immortality.

With his ideas on social order and the ideal of universal resurrection, Fedorov, and later on his followers, attempted to use Russian Orthodox religion in support of this “common task” as it spread into philosophy, the sciences, the arts, as well as revolutionary politics.

One of the pivotal biblical narratives lying behind this ideology was that of the Transfiguration; an event that marks Jesus's recognition of his divine essence as the Christ. In Russian Orthodoxy, the mystery of the Transfiguration is central to both theology and philosophy, wherein light is crucial, and where one encounters the idea that the temporal world needs to be transfigured rather than accepted on its own terms.

The Transfiguration mystery, in fact, not only provides the basis for Christology – reasoning on Christ – but also for an understanding of the nature of the material world, human nature, art and the politics of nationalism, linked to the idea of having been bestowed with a universalist mission to transfigure and save the world. On a global level, it is acknowledged today that the ambitions of the current Transhumanist movement are indeed rooted in this 19th century movement of Russian Cosmism.

“ Everlasting life and blessing lie not in possessive attachment, but in letting go generously of the mania to be always in control and in manipulative power ”

Transhumanism holds that in the near future, humans might eventually be able to radically transfigure themselves, by transcending just being human, and evolve into highly developed beings endowed with powerful capabilities, and thus inaugurate the post-human era and condition. While the ideal of improving the human condition is laudable, various concerns from philosophical, ethical, political and theological levels have been directed towards transhumanist ideology, as well as to technocratic futurists. From a Catholic perspective, improvement of the human condition and the physical universe can only be reached through the safeguarding of the principles of communion and stewardship, and not through a thirst for dominion and power.

Although a cosmist himself, philosopher [Vladimir Solovyov](#) (1853-1900) envisioned immortality and transfiguration as a spiritual and mystical reality rather than a scientific and technological endeavour which shapes a god out of humanity. In his famous 1880 lectures on ‘Godmanhood’, Solovyov argued that in the universal process of progressive transformation, humanity is the intermediary between the divine and the physical order of things. He based his argumentation on the premiss of the incarnation wherein God became human, and not vice versa. In other words, argues Solovyov, it is the ‘Godmanhood’ paradigm, rather than ‘mangodhood’, that safeguards our way to salvific transfiguration.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus reveals his divine-human identity to the three witnesses on the mount of the Transfiguration. Flanked by Elijah and Moses, Jesus comes forth as the fulfilment of law and prophecy, while revealing also that humanity’s futuristic goal is to be embraced, rather than attained. “This is my beloved son. Listen to him” resounds as God’s directive for the way forward to fulfilment. In Jesus, the beloved son, humanity has already reached fulfilment, as God assumed humanity, and “gives us everything else along with him”.

In the narrative of Abraham's sacrifice, God is revealed as the one who blesses and safeguards human life for posterity. Testing Abraham's heart, in danger of possessively withholding his only son as the sole guarantor of future existence, God teaches him that true everlasting life and blessing lie not in possessive attachment, but in letting go generously of the mania to be always in control and in manipulative power.

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